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Anna Mae Duane

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J19

PLEASURE READING

The Mixed Pleasures of *Geek Love*

Anna Mae Duane
University of Connecticut

This past summer, I had the great pleasure of sitting around a campfire with friends discussing sentimentalism's coercive power over us. As nineteenth-century scholars, we were all well versed in how images of children have been deployed to evoke both tears and donations. Yet we all admitted to crying at sappy plane movies, at fundraising appeals, and at manipulative Hallmark commercials. As students of the era, we shouldn't be surprised by how fully the nineteenth century is still with us, pulling on tender heartstrings we thought we had fortified by years of critical thinking. We were all familiar with Adam Smith's discussion of the sentimental as our capacity to imagine that we are feeling the pain of another, and everyone at that summer gathering knew quite well that we were not *really* accessing the emotions on display, that the pain or joy we had witnessed on screen were old scripts designed to hack into our sympathies.[1] Yet, no matter what our brains tell us, the tears still come, betraying how susceptible our emotional chords are to manipulation.

I thought of that campfire conversation when I first sat down to write about how Katherine Dunn's 1989 novel *Geek Love* pulls visceral reactions out of the reader, revealing how powerfully our hearts are entangled with cultural stories we thought we had left behind. And in truth, when I began this article, I thought it was going to be a story about the great pleasure of repeatedly teaching this book. Year after year, student discussions of this text move from shock at the novel's blasphemous portrait of the American family to a dawning respect for the author's skill, to a begrudging, almost involuntary, love of the book's problematic characters. I've never found another text that quite does

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what *Geek Love* pulls off. Of course, as Peter Coviello argued so beautifully in the first installment of this feature, the "pleasure of 'pleasure reading,' after all, isn't simple. Often it is made up of an unstable compound of fascination, resistance, captivation, disquiet, *dislike*."[2] In other words, we take pleasure in what books pull out of us, often without our conscious consent. And that's why, once I finished the first draft of this essay, I knew I had been telling only half the truth about the pleasure I've taken from this complicated, irreverent novel. Like the tears that spring up, unbidden, shame-tinged, at a sappy commercial depicting familial bliss, the reactions *Geek Love* elicits reveal how vulnerable we are to the seductions of domesticity, selling us love in ten easy steps. One of the reasons I find myself happily reassigning this book stems from the decidedly mixed pleasure of recognizing, again and again, the depth of my own investments in the sort of parental martyrdom that generates both the shock and the recoil at the center of *Geek Love*.

But let's start with my students. In my class on disability studies—the class in which I routinely teach *Geek Love*—the grip of the sentimental is tenacious. In one of my opening exercises, I ask students to post an image or narrative about disability and discuss it briefly. Invariably, at least the third of a class will post a picture of a disabled child, designed to elicit tears of inspiration for what those children have "overcome" or tears of pity for what they can't. One week later, we read Rosemarie Garland Thomson's essay "The Politics of Staring," in which she describes four visual modalities that media narratives tend to impose on disabled bodies. Invariably, Garland-Thomson's section on "the sentimental" mode receives the most discussion. In that section, she argues that sentimental portrayals of disability provide emotional payoff for the viewer, rather than benefiting the subject of the narrative. The innocent disabled waif, she contends, enables "viewers' own narratives of progress, improvement, or heroic deliverance and contains disability's threat in the sympathetic, helpless child for whom the viewer is empowered to act."[3] While many students are struck with the accuracy of her critique, many others are loath to acknowledge that the sentimental response to disability—especially disabled children—deserves criticism.

In their resistance to the almost-unconscious pull of the disabled or endangered child (which are often understood as the same thing—more on that in a minute!), we confront one of few remaining wellsprings of the United States' ever-shrinking well of altruism. Yes, the

argument runs, we (the putatively able bodied) are empowered. We are made aware of that power through the sadness that emerges in imagining life on the other side. But the tears—and the urge to help that often accompany those tears—figure that power a site of virtuous obligation. We feel physically compelled to want to help, to share. There's a rush of warm, pleasurable feeling that extends us out toward others while confirming our own status as good people. How, my students ask, can that be a bad thing?

When children are the object of our protective impulses, the conviction that love not only softens the heart but actually serves as a firm taskmaster intensifies. Sentimentalists from Harriet Beecher Stowe to the propagators of QAnon can count on a near-universal response to a sad child, and especially a sad white child. It goes without saying that those childish tears must be dried and that the viewer, presumably a powerful adult, will do anything, make any sacrifice, to end that suffering. In short, *we* are the ones who are helpless, unable to resist the full-body call to saviorhood that adulthood, and especially parenthood, evokes in us. The willing martyrdom of the powerful has, of course, been deployed in the service of maintaining power for centuries. When John Adams smugly told Abigail that her plea to "remember the ladies" was "saucy" in light of the fact that men were "obliged to go fair, and softly," he insisted that female equality was unnecessary because powerful men were the ones bound to serve their dependents. "In practice," he quipped, "you know we are the subjects [and have] only the Name of Masters."[4] Saidiya Hartman has written compellingly about this particular cultural fantasy in which the powerful imagine themselves overcome by "the strength of weakness."[5] While Hartman was particularly interested in the how that fantasy played out when deployed as a defense of slavery, the concept of happily disempowered "caretakers" still resonates powerfully in visions of an idealized—and almost invariably white—family unit. In this particular version of the family, the insistence that able-bodied adults are little more than puppets manipulated by the heartstrings held by small children still has considerable force. This investment in the cultural story in which love transforms a would-be tyrant into a servant, is, of course, a particularly pernicious bait and switch that reifies a status quo in which those in power label coercion as love, and in which women, people of color, children, and the disabled are encouraged to embrace the emotional and cultural payoff that accompanies self-sacrifice.

Geek Love ruthlessly exposes the rot at the heart of the family romance in which sentiment inevitably renders adults, and particularly parents, the devoted servants of the small and powerless. Innocence is dispatched immediately, violently, in the opening pages. In an early chapter, we meet a family that checks all the boxes of cozy domesticity. The kiddies are curled up on the carpet, asking their dad to tell them a tale every child finds fascinating—their own origin story. Oly, one of the children and the novel's main narrator, recounts this typical evening with nostalgia and affection. Al Binewski, the family patriarch, when approached by his daughters asking for his attention, "laugh[s] and put his magazine down. 'Tell us how you thought of us,' [her sisters] demanded." As for Oly, she "leaned on his knee and looked into his good heavy face. 'Please, Papa,' I begged, 'tell us the Rose Garden.'"[6] Faced with this family shorthand for a well-loved story often told, Al Binewski "would puff and tease and refuse" to tell "the Rose Garden." The children, in turn, would coax and cajole, sure that their father will melt in the face of their adorable onslaught. Like all good patriarchs, Al happily relinquishes his power in the service of his family. Finally, all the children are enveloped in their parents' beaming attention, promised a story that would assure them of their inestimable value.

The story of the Binewski family origins is not devoid of the love and affection that we've been set up to expect, but Al certainly complicates the recipe. His recounting of the family's beginnings quickly deviates from the formula in which love functions as the prime mover toward marriage and children. Instead, we are told an origin story in which it is the desire for money and control that generates the desire for reproduction. It all begins when Al, the owner of a traveling freak show, finds himself frustrated with one of his workers pressing "for a raise I couldn't afford" (9). While he's stewing about being thwarted by a demanding employee, Al's eye falls upon one of Portland's famous rose gardens. "The roses started him thinking," the novel relates, "how the oddity of them was beautiful and how that oddity was contrived to give them value." In a flash, Al realized that children, like roses, could be designed in a way that would increase their value. "And I thought to myself," Al relates, now warming up to his story, "that would be a rose garden worthy of a man's interest!" (10).

This doting father had then set about purposely designing his own children so that they could star in the family's freak show business. He and his wife Lily "began experimenting with illicit and prescription drugs, insecticides, and eventually radioisotopes." The family matri-

arch "developed a complex dependency on various drugs during this process," but, we are told, "she didn't mind. Relying on Papa's ingenuity to keep her supplied, Lily seemed to view her addiction as a minor by-product of their creative collaboration" (7). And their collaboration results in the very children who charmingly insist upon stories in the living room: the oldest son Arty has flippers for hands and feet; Oly is an albino dwarf, and her sisters are conjoined twins.

My students are, understandably, horrified by this particular family romance. When I ask them to articulate the source of their distaste, they stare at me, aghast. It's more than obvious, after all. No decent parent would *ever* see their child as an asset, and they certainly wouldn't "harm" them by inflicting disability upon them. Parents are by definition self-sacrificial, and children are the rightful recipients of never-ending self-denial. The thought of "designing" children to fulfill a business model that benefits the parents is morally repugnant. In short, my students insist, *Geek Love*, in its very first chapter, violates the family contract that Americans have imbibed along with our childhood juice boxes: that money and love do not mix, that the worlds of parental love and proprietary claims are fundamentally incompatible. Our own involuntary affect when faced with an appealing child, the sentimental bargain assures us, confirms our own purity of heart. When it comes to *Geek Love*, the reader's indignation emerges in no small part in response to the *lack* of shame, the complete absence of tears, of parents who view their children as valuable assets. Our horror reassures us—pleasurably, I might add—that there is a vast moral gulf between ourselves and these mercenary American adults.

The brilliance of this novel is that it does not allow the reader to remain comfortable in their own pleasant indignance. The shocking, alien premise of the Binewski family soon resolves itself into a funhouse mirror reflection of normative family values. Lil, the family matriarch, congratulates herself on the generosity born of the physical self-sacrifice required to produce such remarkable children: "What greater gift," she asks dreamily, "could you offer your children than an inherent ability to earn a living just by being themselves?" (7). In her triangulation of maternal generosity, childish authenticity, and future earning power, Lil sounds suspiciously like a "good mother" whose enthusiasm for her children's happiness is inextricably bound to a vision of them as "successful." Of course, being successful in the United States undeniably requires earning a good amount of money. That earning power, *Geek Love* reminds us, depends largely on the sort of body one has.

While an initial readerly response may well be to pull back in indignation at the "harm" the parents inflict on their children's extraordinary bodies to make the family more profitable, the narrative follows up with a knockout blow. If we take pleasure in the comfort of knowing that our families are nothing like the Binewskis, *Geek Love* deftly reveals how powerfully the logic of the market shapes the choices of "normal" families when a new member arrives. A few chapters into the novel, we are confronted with perhaps the most sentimentalized of all familial moments: a mother's tentative introduction to a newborn child:

> She is looking. Her fingers skim the red skull, flutter down the crumpled features, twitch in brief visits to the ears, then slide down for a brief grasp of the tiny jaw. Both her hands now spread, touching the tiny arc of the breastbone, clasping the shoulders tenderly. Lifting the two arms to their bent limit, her fingers probe the joints, checking the dimpled knuckles, counting, recounting the small larval fingers, reaching for the thorax, a firm grasp on the concave buttocks that crease into thin legs, and again the searching repeated. Count of the pea-sized toes. Her eyes slide up to the flat, hooded eyes of her husband, my father, the sire and deliverer. He looks away, picks up damp cloths, busies himself with cleanliness. Her eyes and hands return to the faintly squirming infant. She flips him neatly, his chest in her left palm and her right hand now throbbing in terrible anxiety over the tiny padded spine. "But . . ." she begins, turns the babe back to re-examine his front. "But, Al . . ." And the tent of wrinkles appears on her smooth milk forehead, the doubt that I had never seen in her eyes before. Al turns away and then quickly forces himself to come back to her. He puts his hands on her cheeks and strokes softly. "It's true, Lil. There's nothing. He's just a regular . . . regular baby." And then Lil's face is wet and her breath is bubbling nastily. (64-65)

Once again, the tender accoutrements of the domestic are on full display: a mother's long fingers caressing her baby's tiny ones, the postnatal conversations between mother and father in light of the new life that has just joined them, the tears. And, inevitably, the tug of these physical signals requires action. The baby, born "regular" without any noticeable, or more to the point, without any marketable physical differences, is initially slated for rejection by the Binewskis. Because the infant's physicality does not align with the requirements for "earning a living"

in their world, his care and upbringing become a burden rather than an investment. They plan to abandon him. And as they drive around with this "perfect" baby, looking for a likely place to drop him off, the reader smacks straight into the mirror reflecting our cultural assumptions about which children are a "burden" and why. It is impossible not to recognize the ableist reflection of disabled childhood in the Binkewskis' rejection of a "regular" baby, the dawning realization that something is "wrong," the parental guilt at somehow failing to produce perfection, the tearful decision that the child's body renders them a misfit for a culture that requires a different physicality in order to be "successful."

The pleasure this book provides does not come solely from its skillful skewering of our deeply ableist assumptions about "good parenting" or how powerfully it manages to reveal the market's hold over even the most devoted parent. *Geek Love* captures the reader with how incredibly charismatic these characters are, their charm ruthlessly layered on top of the shock their audience feels upon first meeting them. To begin with, the family patriarch, Al Binewski, speaks in the most delightfully arresting obscenities. Curse words tend to fall into two categories: one denigrates the sacred (i.e., taking God's name in vain); the other involves bodily functions (i.e., exclaiming, "Oh shit!" when dropping your phone). Al manages to weave both types of offense into every exclamation: the "flabby-gashed mother of god!" is my personal favorite. These works of baroque linguistic blasphemy offer a reliably enjoyable shock in their attention to the sacred's fleshy attributes.

But the Binewski children are the real hook of the novel—far from the victims of their parents' cunning, they beat them at their own game. Their ambition is boundless. The book was written well before the reign of the Kardashians, but it is impossible not to see that the Binewskis were way ahead of their time in terms of familial hustle culture. Their success as entrepreneurs and entertainers far outstrips their parents' wildest ambitions for them. As they all work relentlessly to advance to first place in the family competition, there are moments of great humor, and each character shimmers in their own unique concoction of power and need.

Arty, the eldest son and heir apparent, is a powerful mix of charisma and narcissism. The most physically dependent of the siblings, he manages to render the labor required to take care of him a prize to be eagerly sought. Rather than being ashamed of his dependence on others, he declares that it is evidence of moral superiority, building a fol-

lowing of thousands dedicated to a achieving a physical form that would require just such a high level of caretaking.

While Arty renders being needful an act of dominance, his sister Oly finds herself addicted to the work of caretaking. Her masochistic devotion to it enacts the vision of virtuous female martyrdom that sentimental writers enshrined in the nineteenth century and that still exerts itself in the twenty-first. Like her mother, Oly embraces her role on the sidelines, sacrificing herself so that others may shine. She tells herself that her love for Arty was superior to the rest of the family's devotions, precisely because she required so little for herself: "He didn't care if I loved him. He knew I'd serve him absolutely even if he hurt me. And I was not a rival to him. I didn't have an act of my own. I drew the crowds to him rather than to myself" (124). Her self-abnegation, like those of countless other "good" caretakers, is imagined in this irreverent blasphemous novel as a Christlike willingness to surrender one's life for those she loves. "In the end," Oly reflects, "I would always pull up with a sense of glory, that loving is the strong side. It's feeble to be an object [of love]. What's the point of being loved in return, I'd ask myself" (472).

And here, dear reader, is where I find myself wrecked on the shoals of the sharp-edged reflections *Geek Love* provides. After years of teaching feminist theory, I know quite well that Oly's obsequious devotion to acts of self-sacrifice *should* engender the sort of indignance my students feel for Al's paternal tinkering. But that is not what this book pulls out of me—instead of the satisfaction of moral repugnance, I find the decidedly mixed pleasure of recognition. As Oly revels in her role as caretaker, listener, soother, enabler, she imagines herself powerful—a stance that Stowe's Rachel Halliday or Mrs. Bird would heartily endorse. As a teacher, and yes, as a mother, I recognize how powerfully that particular story of servile omnipotence has shaped my own sense of value. As the parent of a college-aged child, I resonate, albeit involuntarily, with Oly's insistence that her worth is derived from serving others as I grapple with my own sense of loss at a now-empty nest.

Geek Love ends with the realization that Oly's martyrdom is just one more hustle. We might be pleased by the virtue that accrues by being at the center of a web of other's needs, but Oly reminds us that spiders live in the center of webs, often to the fly's detriment. Her insistence that she doesn't need anything for herself is soon revealed as yet another performance that masks her desire to control those she serves. Oly, the good self-sacrificing mother, is easily as manipulative as her

allegedly mercenary parents. Toward the end of the novel, Oly's choices reveal the high price exacted by powerful martyrs in the name of love. To "protect" her own daughter from accepting the wrong kind of help, Oly commits an act of appalling violence, immolating herself in the process. Nothing, this novel makes clear, comes for free. For Oly, for all the Binewskis, and for the culture *Geek Love* so powerfully reflects, the family is just another stage upon which we twirl and pirouette to earn our keep. But the book also reminds us, there is love and, yes, great pleasure in the dance.

Notes

1. Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Penguin, 2010).
2. Peter Coviello, "Alone and in Company: Some Pleasures of the Text," *J19: The Journal of Nineteenth-Century Americanists* 1, no. 1 (2013): 13.
3. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, "The Politics of Staring: Visual Rhetorics of Disability in Popular Photography," in *Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities*, ed. Sharon L. Snyder, Brenda Jo Brueggemann, and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2002), 63.
4. John Adams to Abigail Adams, April 14, 1776, *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive*, Massachusetts Historical Society, https://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/archive/doc?id=L17760414ja
5. Saidiya Hartman, "Seduction and the Ruses of Power," *Callaloo* 19, no. 2 (1996): 538.
6. Katherine Dunn, *Geek Love* (New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 2002), 9. Cited parenthetically in the text.

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